

STATEMENT OF CHRISTOPHER K. JARVI, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR PARTNERSHIPS, INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION, VOLUNTEERS, AND OUTDOOR RECREATION, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, HOUSE RESOURCES COMMITTEE CONCERNING H.R. 1796, TO AMEND THE NATIONAL TRAILS SYSTEM ACT TO DESIGNATE THE ROUTE OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER FROM ITS HEADWATERS IN THE STATE OF MINNESOTA TO THE GULF OF MEXICO FOR STUDY FOR POTENTIAL ADDITION TO THE NATIONAL TRAILS SYSTEM AS A NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL, NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL, OR BOTH

April 27, 2006

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to present the Department of the Interior's views on H.R. 1796. The bill would amend the National Trails System Act to study the route of the Mississippi River from its headwaters in the state of Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico for potential addition to the National Trails System as a national scenic trail, a national historic trail, or both.

The Department supports a study of the route of the Mississippi River but recommends that H.R. 1796 be amended to conduct a special resource study to explore the options and to determine the most appropriate designation of the corridor. However, while the Department supports the authorization of this study, we also believe that any funding requested should be directed toward completing the 31 previously authorized studies prior to undertaking this study.

H.R. 1796 would authorize a study of the route of the Mississippi River for potential addition to the National Trail System that would complement and not duplicate other studies of the scenic or historical importance of the Mississippi River that may be underway or undertaken.

The Mississippi River corridor is one of the richest in America's history. The vast majority of resources that define the contemporary Mississippi River and illustrate its stories lie near the river. For centuries it was the internal highway of the continent, witnessing events such as a succession of American Indian cultures, the Louisiana Purchase, the Civil War, and early civil engineering projects. Combined with its major tributaries, the Ohio and Missouri Rivers, the Mississippi River was literally America's first interstate highway. The river corridor is a water route dominated by commercial navigation, although many reaches of the river also are popular for recreational watercraft, and many of the levees are already used as multi-purpose trails or roads. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers plays a key role in the management and regulation of the river itself.

The Mississippi River traverses along the edges of 10 states, linking six NPS areas and up to 40 Federal properties. The Great River Road, coordinated by the Mississippi River Parkway Commission in Minneapolis, Minnesota, is a system of riverside roads and highways threading through the 10 states. It has proven to be a popular organizing element for travelers, local businesses, and tour groups. The Mississippi River Trail, closely linked in many places with the Great River Road, also ties together trail segments. It is organized and promoted by the Mississippi River Trail, Inc., a nonprofit organization based in Fayetteville, Arkansas. It offers approximately 3,000 miles of on-road and bike/pedestrian pathways for the recreational enjoyment, health, conservation, and tourism development of river communities, river states, and the nation.

Because of the complexities associated with the corridor and the Mississippi River's deep, rich history, a special resource study would allow the broadest possible examination of the corridor. An analysis of current conditions, river issues and activities, historic issues, current and potential partners, interested state agencies, affected communities, and related planning projects, would help determine the best designation and coordinating role for this important set of resources. It also would provide recommendations for protection and management that would be most effective in protecting the resources and allowing for public enjoyment of the corridor.

A special resource study would incorporate existing information that has been gathered on the Mississippi River in previous studies that include the Lower Mississippi Delta Region Heritage Study and the Mississippi River Corridor Study. In 1994, Congress authorized the Lower Mississippi Delta Region Heritage Study, directing the Secretary to study the significant resources in seven states and recommend alternatives related to heritage preservation and tourism initiatives. In 1998, the study was completed with four management alternatives: the Lower Mississippi Delta Heritage Tourism Initiative, the Lower Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area, Lower Mississippi Delta Heritage Centers, and Sharing Delta Heritage in the 21st Century. Also, Congress authorized in 1990 and the Mississippi River Commission completed in 1996, the Mississippi River Corridor Study. The study was to examine the methods for preserving and enhancing the resources of the 2,400 mile stretch of the Mississippi River. The study recommended the area be designated as a national heritage corridor, reflecting centuries of evolving travel and settlement. The heritage corridor would border the river and all counties and parishes through which the Great River Road passes.

Other alternatives that could be examined in a special resource study include a chain of national scenic byways, designated state by state, emphasizing economic development and tourism, or a national historic water trail. In conclusion, a special resource study would determine whether the corridor meets the criteria for a potential addition to the National Park System, the National Trails System, or another suitable alternative.

Given the length of the river corridor, the complexity of the resource, and the number of communities along the river corridor, we estimate the cost of completing the special resource study to be approximately \$500,000.

Our proposed amendment is attached at the end of this testimony.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to comment. This concludes my prepared remarks and I will be happy to answer any questions you or other committee members might have.

Suggested amendment in the nature of a substitute to H.R. 1796.

Strike all that follows after the enacting clause and insert the following:

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the “Mississippi River Trail Study Act”.

SEC. 2. RESOURCE STUDY OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER TRAIL.

(a) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of the Interior, in consultation with appropriate Federal, state, county and local governmental entities, shall conduct a resource study along the route of the Mississippi River in the counties contiguous to the river from its headwaters in the State of Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. The study shall evaluate a range of alternatives for protecting and interpreting the resources, including alternatives for potential addition to the National Trails System.

(b) STUDY OBJECTIVES.—In conducting the study under subsection (a), the Secretary shall evaluate alternatives for achieving the following objectives:

(1) identifying the resources and historic themes associated with the route referred to in subsection (a);

(2) making a review of existing studies and reports, such as the Mississippi River Corridor Study and the Lower Mississippi Delta Report, to complement, and not duplicate, other studies of the scenic or historical importance of the Mississippi River that may be underway or undertaken;

(2) establishing connections with partnerships already engaged in the development of various trails and sites along the corridor of the Mississippi River;

(3) preserving recreational opportunities and facilitating access for a variety of recreational users;

(4) protecting rare, threatened, or endangered plant and animal species, and rare or unusual plant communities and habitats;

(5) protecting historically significant landscapes, districts, sites, and structures;

(6) identifying alternatives for preservation and interpretation of the route referred to in subsection (a) by the National Park Service, other Federal, state, or local governmental entities, or private and non-profit organizations; and

(7) identifying cost estimates for any necessary acquisition, development, interpretation, operation, and maintenance associated with the alternatives referred to in subsection (a).

(c) TRANSMISSION TO CONGRESS.—Within three years after funds are first made available for the study, the Secretary shall transmit the final study to the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources of the United States Senate and to the Committee on Resources of the United States House of Representatives.

SEC. 3. AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.

There is authorized to be appropriated such sums as may be necessary to carry out this Act.